The Seated Female Nude: From Raphael to Ingres

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When the female nude became a subject favoured by western artists at the beginning of the sixteenth century, a pose frequently depicted was of a seated female seen from behind, often from a slightly lower viewpoint, with the cleft between the buttocks prominently displayed. Early examples are Albrecht Altdorfer's 'Satyr Family' (1507, Gemäldegalerie Berlin-Dahlem), Titian's 'Concert Champêtre' — formerly attributed to Giorgione — (c.1509, Louvre, Paris) and Sebastiano del Piombo's 'The Death of Adonis' (1511-1515, Uffizi, Florence), but perhaps the most influential was Giulio Romano's fresco of 'The Three Graces' in the Villa Farnesina at Rome, painted under the general supervision of Raphael and with the Grace in the foreground seen from the rear evidently based on the nude male rider in Raphael's 'The Repulse of Attila' (1514, Vatican).[1] Rome was at that time not yet a magnet for artists from all over Europe but this composition was engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi and, if only because it was attributed to Raphael, would have been known even to artists who never

1 There is a preliminary drawing of the seated nude soldier by Raphael in the Staedel, Frankfurt, reproduced in Paul Joannides: *The Drawings of Raphael: with a Complete Catalogue* (Berkeley 1983), 218, catalogue no.339. This seems to have been the basis of a drawing by Giulio Romano of a seated male nude in the Albertina, Vienna, accession no.249.

visited Rome.[2] The pose also appears in various adapted forms in a celebrated series of sixteen pornographic engravings showing different sexual positions by Raimondi from drawings by Giulio Romano.[3]

Later sixteenth-century examples of a seated female nude seen from the rear include Correggio's 'Jupiter and Io' (c.1530, Kunsthistorische Museum, Vienna) , Tintoretto's 'The Liberation of Arsinoë' (c.1556, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) and Veronese's 'Venus and Adonis' (c.1562, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Augsburg). These do not show any particular debt to Giulio Romano's 'Three Graces' other than, perhaps, in the general pose, but the female on the right in in Tintoretto's 'Women Making Music' (c.1560, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) and Luca Cambiase's 'Venus and Cupid by the Sea' (c.1560, Galleria Borghese, Rome) are sufficiently close to Giulio Romano's foreground

2 Stefania Massari: *Giulio Romano: pinxitetdelineavit: opera graficheautografe di collaborazione e bottega,* (Rome 1993), 2-3. CorinnaHöpper: *Raffael und die Folgen: das Kunstwerk in Zeitaltern seiner graphischenReproduzierbarheit*, Ostfildern-Ruit 2001), 348 illus. 350 also reproduces this engraving. There was also an inferior copy engraved in 1693 by Nicolas Dorigny, for which see 353-4 1958, 353-4, illus. 360.

3 These sixteen engravings had achieved almost mythic status by the late seventeenth century but the only surviving version is an incomplete set of woodcuts discovered on a second-hand stall by Walter Toscanini, son of the famous conductor, early in the twentieth century: see Lynne Lawner: *I Modi: the sixteen pleasures: an erotic album of the Italian renaissance* (London 1988), 9,17.One of the positions drawn by Giulio Romano also appears, with minor variations, in a booklet showing sexual positions originally printed in 1787 and frequently reissued — sometimes with new art work showing the same positions — in the early nineteenth century: see A.D.Harvey: *Sex in Georgian England: attitudes and prejudices from the 1720s to the 1820s* (London 2001 edition), 27-8.

Giulio Romano also painted on the ceiling adjacent to his ‹Three Graces› in the Villa Farnesina a larger fresco of ‹The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche›, showing Psyche seated and twisting to her left to show her cleft: a preliminary study for this, possibly by Raphael rather than his assistant, is in the Teylers Museum, Haarlem and is reproduced in Bette Talvacchia: *Taking positions: on the erotic in renaissance culture* (Princeton 2001), 139. This seems to be the source for the woman in position number 13 in *I Modi*. His preliminary drawing for a stucco relief of 'Europa and the Bull, formerly in the Bridgewater Collection, reproduced in Frederic Hartt, *Giulio Romano* (New Haven, 1958) plate 224, another rear view of a seated female, is arguably the source for the woman in position number 16.

Grace in the turn of the head and the bend of the nearside leg for the connection to be unmistakable. One may also suspect a debt to Giulio Romano in Titian's 'Venus and Adonis' (c.1560, versions in Galleria Nazionaled'Arte Antica, Rome and Prado, Madrid). In the seventeenth century Nicolas Poussin, who was working in Rome in the years 1624 to 1640 and had plenty of opportunity to see the Villa Farnesina and prints by Raimondi, adopted the pose of Giulio Romano's foreground Grace with regard to the head and leg in the female figure second from the right in 'The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite' (1634-7, Philadelphia Museum of Art) and in the foreground figure in his late 'Apollo in love with Daphne' (c.1664, Louvre, Paris). Even closer to Giulio Romano's Grace, though reversed like a mirror image, is Ingres's 'Bather of Valpinçon, '*La Grande Baigneuse*' (1808, Louvre), which was in fact painted in Rome, and also in his 'Turkish Bath' (1862, Louvre).

The crowded canvas of Ingres's 'Turkish Bath',with its multitude of unconvincing bosoms may serve to remind one that artists also painted the female nude viewed in a variety of postures from the front (though one interpretation of this painting might be that the view from the rear is more interesting or meaningful, since it is the female seen from the rear that dominates the composition). But it is a moot question why artists should even want to paint seated female nudes seen from the rear. It is not easy to interpret the aesthetics of the female nude during the Renaissance. We know from literary sources that small breasts and a big bottom were regarded as elements of female beauty in sixteenth-century Italy, and the large bottoms of Renaissance nudes might well be explained by diet: but the origin of those small pubescent breasts on all those beefy women whom Renaissance artists seem to have been familiar with is more difficult to explain.[4] It is not really possible to

4 See for example TomasoTomai: *Idea del giardino del mondo*, Bologna 1586 edition, 111. Tomai may however have used the word *'grosse'* to signify 'fat' rather than 'big' as he lists the three things required for female beauty that were to be '*grosse*' as '*coscia*, *culo*, *natura*', i.e. thighs, bottom, vagina but also includes '*natura'* along with mouth and waist amongst the three things required to be '*strette'*, i.e. narrow. Giovanni Benedetto Sinibaldi, whose Geneanthropeia of 1642 was a standard authority on sexual matters in its day, thought 'Little breasts in a woman are a greater

draw firm conclusions about a recognized standard of beauty in this period; in the case of Raphael's standing 'Three Graces' (c.1503-5, Musée Condé, Chantilly) one notes that they are considerably plumper than their inspiration, a Hellenistic sculpture, whereas Cambiase's nudes often seem slimmer and longer-limbed than those of Raphael and Giulio Romano.[5] The seated female nudes seen from the rear in Sebastiano del Piombo's 'The Death of Adonis' and Tintoretto's 'The Liberation of Arsinoe' , and later in Domenico Fetti's 'Hero mourning Leander' (1621-2) (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) seem today quite remarkably displeasing from an aesthetic or erotic perspective, but for all one knows this may even have been partly intentional: one notes that Hans Baldung Grien's engraving 'The Witches', circa 1510, one of the earliest depictions of a seated female nude seen from behind, is intended to display not beauty or the vulnerability of the innocent but fleshly imperfection and the baseness of a mortality that denies goodness and Christian faith.[6] The difficulty of figuring out the symbolism, or even the mere existence of a symbolic structure, in Veronese's allegories of Unfaithfulness, Scorn, Respect and Happy Union, circa 1575, in the National Gallery, London– the allegory of Unfaithfulness centres on another rear view of a seated female nude – is an indication of how far we are from understanding precisely what was in the minds of individual artists. The sheer number and sexual

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sign of lust, than great ones', *Rare verities. The cabinet of Venus unlocked and her secrets laid open. Being a translation of part of Sinibaldus his Geneanthropeia* (London 1658 — actually 1657), 28. This may however be simply a rationalization of the fashionable preference for small breasts during the Renaissance, itself possibly simply copied from classical and Hellenistic sculptures.

5 For Cambiase see especially his drawing 'Bathsheba bathing' in the Uffizi, Florence.

6 See Matthias Mende: *Hans Baldung Grien: das graphische Werk* (Unterschneidheim 1978), plate 120. Another feature of the human body customarily edited out by Renaissance and Baroque artists was the pigmentation of the areole of the breast, shown only in depictions of witches and, paradoxically, of Christ on the Cross, the point of the latter being the requirement of emphasizing Christ's mortality and the fleshly imperfection inseparable from mortality, Leo Steinberg: *The sexuality of Christ in renaissance art and in modern oblivion* (London 1984), 8-9 and Harvey, *Sex in Georgian England*, 11-12.

Figure 1. Raphael, 'The Repulse of Attila' (Detail).

Figure 2. Giulio Romano, ‘The Three Graces’.

Figure 3. Poussin, ‘The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitriite’ (Detail).

Figure 4. Ingres, ‘The Bather of Valpinçon’.

allure of paintings and drawings of the female nude by Giulio Romano, and his involvement in producing pornographic prints, makes it fairly obvious that he was attracted by the erotic aspect of nudity, but this is not necessarily true of all his contemporaries.

Better documentation, and perhaps a degree of conceptual crudity, enables one to interpret the female nude of the nineteenth century more easily than for an earlier period. We know for example that Manet deliberately chose to follow Titian's 'Concert Champêtre' in his '*Dé jeuner sur l'herbe*' (and also of course Titian's 'Venus of Urbino' in his 'Olympia') by way of some sort of proto-post-modernist comment on the classical tradition.[7] There may have been something similar behind Louis David's 'Mars disarmed by Venus and the Three Graces' (1824, MuséesRoyaux de Beaux Arts, Brussels), based on a close study of earlier nude paintings but including Three Graces who are strikingly graceless.[8]The female nude copied from Poussin's 'The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite' sixth from the left in Thomas Couture's 'The Romans in their decadence' (1847, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) is simply one of a series of scholarly homages in this painting.[9] One might even wonder if Pierre Auguste Renoir's two versions of

7 See Paul Hayes Tucker, 'Making sense of Edouard Manet's *Le Dejeuner surl'herbe*' in Tuckerm ed., *Manet's le dejeuner surl'herbe*, Cambridge 1998, 1-37, at 12-14, and Theodore Reff: *Manet: Olympia* (London 1976), 45-9.

8 Included in David's preliminary studies for 'Mars disarmed by Venus and the three Graces' is a pen and ink drawing of either Arnold Houbraken s '*A painter›s studio*' (showing a female nude from the rear), then in a private collection, now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, or a copy made in 1802 by Leonard Defrance, which was then in the southern Netherlands (now Belgium) where David was living in exile: Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat: *Jacques-Louis David 1748-1825: Catalogue raisonne des dessins* (Milan 2002) 1172, and catalogue item no.1923 recto. In fact Venus's posture in David's painting seems to owe something to Giulio Romano's 'Marriage of Cupid and Psyche' at the Villa Farnesina which David would have seen decades earlier. One notes too that life studies of seated female models viewed from the rear were more than once made by David's studio pupils circa 1802-3, Francois-Joseph Navez: Charleroi 1787 - *Bruxelles 1869: la nostalgie de l'Italie* (Ghent 1999), 169.

9 Linda Nochlin: *Courbet* (London 2007), 21, describes Couture's painting as a 'tableau vivant'with poses from 'Raphael, Michelangelo, Poussin, Veronese, and Tiepolo'.

'Bather arranging her hair' were not some kind of answer or response to Ingres's 'Bather of Valpinçon' and 'Turkish Bath'.[10]

In the eighteenth century William Hodges had been evidently making some sort of point with the rearview of a native woman with an entangling but revealing robe, suggestive of a Rubens with tattoos, in the foreground of his 'Tahiti revisited' (1776, National Maritime Museum, London: there is another version, with the title 'A view taken in the Bay of Otaheite Peha' at Anglesey Abbey), the point — whatever it was — being underlined by his use of the same figure, minus tattoos, in a more conventional pseudo-classical grouping in his 'Landscape, ruins and figures' (1790, private collection) : a possible source for the figure is the somewhat slimmer hipped goddess second from the right in Luca Giordano's 'Judgment of Paris' (c.1682, Hermitage, St. Petersburg), which is arguably derived from Giulio Romano's foreground Grace or the female seen from the rear based on this in Poussin's 'Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite'. It does not seem however that quotation or reference of the sort that Hodges, or later Manet, indulged in was at all the custom in the Renaissance period, except with regard to classical models.

Another possible explanation of artists interest in women seen from behind is suggested by Jean-Leon Gerôme's 'Slave Auction' (1884, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) with its rear view of a standing nude in the foreground, facing a group of narrowed-eyed potential customers — one of a long tradition of paintings of the nude that reinforce their erotic motif by their emphasis on voyeurism The obvious intention of using the woman's backside to draw attention to the unseen front view of her sexual parts. Throughout the Renaissance and Baroque period, and as late as Gerôme's day, depiction of pubic hair and the female vulva was

10 Renoir's 'Bather arranging her hair' (1885, Sterling and Francine Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts), and, with the model in an almost identical pose but facing the other way 'Bather arranging her hair (1885-90, National Gallery, London), and also the girl in the background, her legs cut off by the water she is standing in, and partly concealed by one of the foreground figures, in 'The large bathers' (c.1884-7, Philadelphia Museum of Art).

taboo to artists, and though no earlier artist seems to have employed the device of suggesting the front by displaying the back as crudely as Gerôme, one might suspect a similar intention in Lukas Cranach the Elder's 'Judgment of Paris' of 1530 in the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe, in which the goddess seen from the rear thrusts both her arms back from the shoulder in a curious gesture which can only be intended to present her bosom and stomach more prominently.[11] A little later Correggio's 'Jupiter and Io' was essentially a rear view of a woman during sexual intercourse.

Such suggestions of possible meanings may be applicable to some individual artists, but so long as one can judge only by what they painted, interpretations along these lines are hardly convincing as an explanation for what is clearly a sustained tradition in which a significant number of artists participated. Leaving aside feminist commentaries that reject the male viewpoint altogether, the numerous studies of the nude that have appeared since Kenneth Clark's *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Form* (1956) mostly deal with the paintings of unclothed women as paintings rather than as evidence of how men saw, or wished to see, women's bodies.[12] The object of this article is simply to draw attention to a tradition. Although identifying a phenomenon is a necessary preliminary to explaining it, one cannot always expect that

11 Cranach's 'Judgment of Paris' at Karlsruhe may be compared to his treatment of the same subject in the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. In both cases the goddess furthest from Paris seems neither particularly interested nor self-conscious, the one nearest Paris in the Karlsruhe painting seems girlishly embarrassed, the one nearest Paris at Copenhagen merely deprecating: the one in the middle with her back turned — the grouping obviously adopted from the Hellenistic sculptural grouping copied in Raphael's 'Three Graces' in the Musée Condé, Chantilly — at Karlsruhe pushes her arms back in that odd gesture, at Copenhagen scratches her shoulder awkwardly with her right hand and, judging by the position of her left arm, covers her private parts — i.e. draws attention to them — with her left hand. One of the problems of decoding Cranach's nudes however is the suspicion that the slenderness even of his Heras an Athenes is due not to some sort of survival of the gothic tradition or to any obstinate separation on Cranach's part from anything going on in the Renaissance in other parts of Europe, but to a personal preference for thirteen-year-old models.

12 The references in the article on 'Male gaze' in www.wikipedia.comprovide a useful guide to feminist discussion of the nude in art.

explanation will follow automatically on identification. One should bear in mind that prior to the eighteenth century we know very little about what painters were thinking other than what can be deduced from their paintings. Perhaps a clue is provided by the unsatisfactory — to modern taste — handling of the seated female nude motif in Sebastiano del Piombo's 'The Death of Adonis' and in Tintoretto's 'The Liberation of Arsinoë': since some sort of aesthetic effect rather than fidelity to any notion of objective reality was what artists aimed at in Renaissance painting, they were primarily concerned with what they could handle effectively from an aesthetic point of view, and a rear view of a seated woman's bottom was considerably more of a challenge to technique than the small cantilever bosoms fashionable in that period. It might be that it was simply the sheer difficulty of painting the rear view of a seated female nude, the professional challenge involved, that made this motif, of such interest to the artists of not just the Renaissance but also of the following centuries.